

# New Orleans: The First State Capital

## Cabildo 1803-1812



The territorial governor was W.C.C. Claiborne.

In the **Government House**, the legislature debated an issue that would shape the political landscape for the next 100 years: In which city should the state government be located. As early as 1814, politicians representing rural parishes argued that a capital in Donaldsonville or Baton Rouge would better reflect the state's interest. On February 4, 1825, the legislature agreed to move the capital to Donaldsonville the following year. Fifteen days later, those opposed to relocation delayed the move until 1829. However, the legislature moved sooner than planned: The Government House burned in 1827 and the capital moved temporarily to the **Orleans Theater**.

### Is That a Fact?

- Cabildo refers to a type of government and not an architectural style.
- In 1803, the Louisiana Territory was officially transferred to the United States Government in the Cabildo.
- The Cabildo was 17 years old when Louisiana attained statehood; the Government House, 51.

**The Cabildo** is best known as the birthplace of Louisiana statehood. In 1812, statesmen gathered in this former Spanish courthouse to create the 18th state of the Union. Some historians say the Cabildo served briefly as Louisiana's capitol. True or not, the new state government soon chose its first capitol building—the Government House.

## Government House 1812-1827



Governors serving here were W.C.C. Claiborne, Jacques P. Villere, Thomas B. Robertson, Henry S. Thibideaux, and Henry S. Johnson.

*“A tremendous [sic] fire broke out here on Friday night about half past ten o'clock . . . valuable property was lost great confusion prevailed and several (lives?) were lost, and some crippled [sic] from throwing out furniture and other effects from the upper stories into the streets—the Legislature is now without a house to sit in . . .”*

-John Moore, state representative, to John Close  
New Orleans 2/4/1828



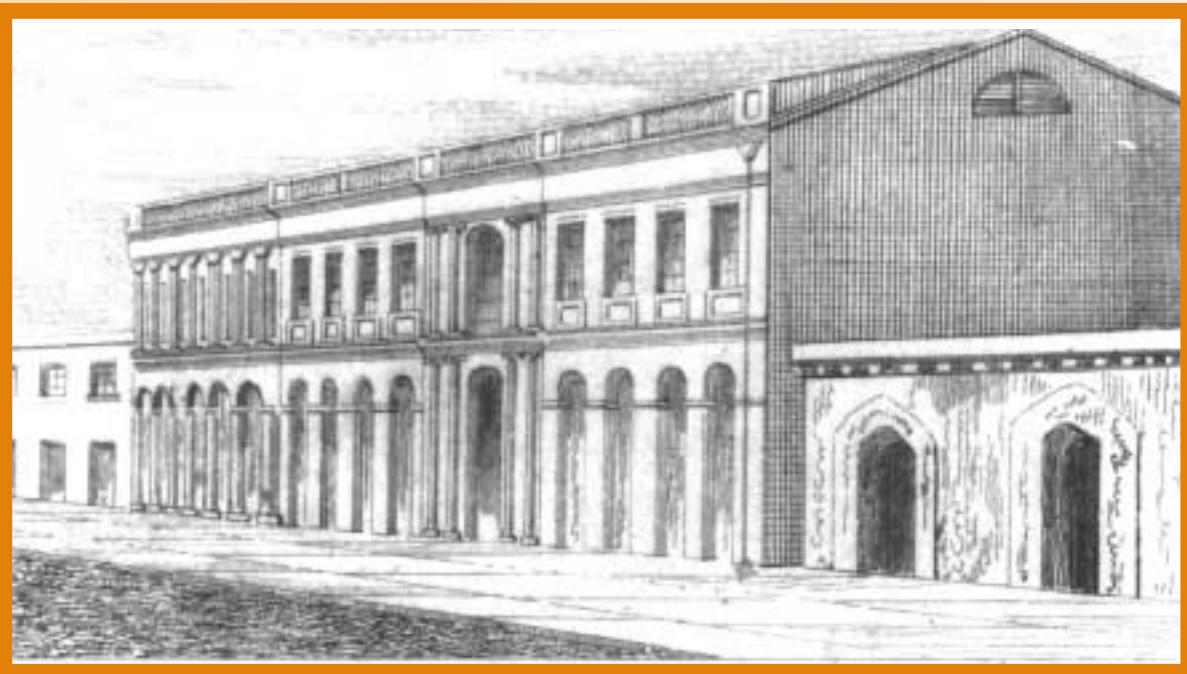
# A Capital Deferred: Challenges and Setbacks

After the Government House burned in 1827, the **Orleans Theater** briefly housed the legislature while a more suitable structure was sought. Several days later, the government moved to the **Ursuline Convent**. Meanwhile, construction of the new capitol was not going well.

In 1827, legislators visiting Donaldsonville found serious defects in the building's construction. That same year, the government sued Antoine Peytavin, the

architect, for failure to complete the capitol building. Construction was further delayed in 1829, when an epidemic killed all but one worker. These problems did little to mollify those politicians opposed to leaving New Orleans. Nevertheless, the legislature moved to **Donaldsonville** in 1830, still wondering whether the new state house would be ready.

## Orleans Theatre 1827

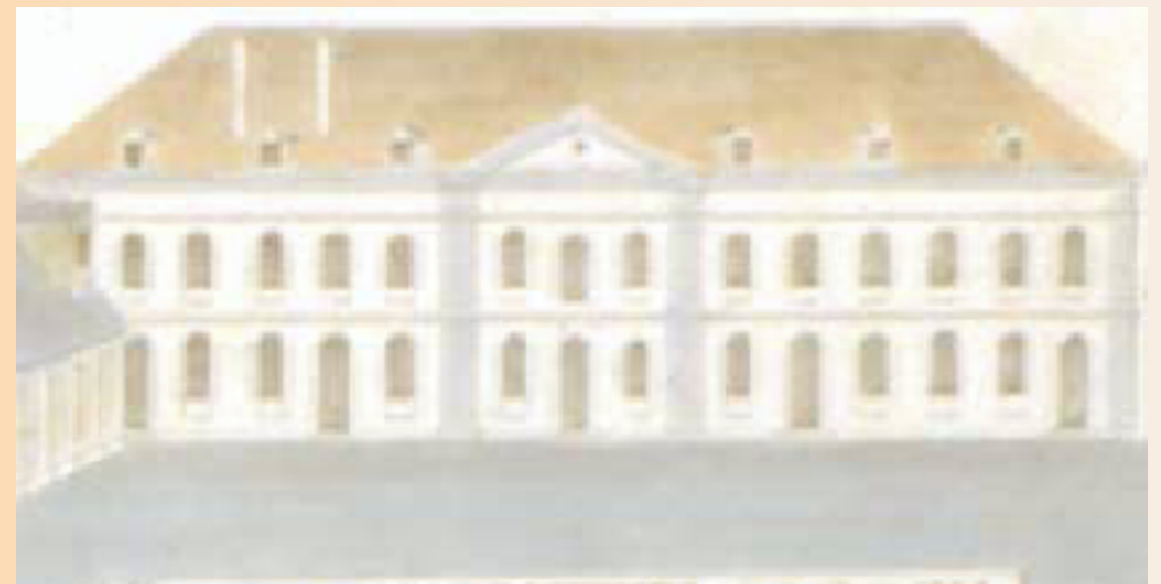


One governor served here: Henry S. Johnson.

*“... the Legislature is now without a house to sit in—a meeting was held this morning at the Orleans Street ball room and a committee appointed to procure a suitable house for the balance of the Session.”*

-John Moore, state representative,  
to John Close  
New Orleans 2/4/1828

## The Old Ursuline Convent 1827-29



Governors serving here were Henry S. Johnson, Pierre A.B. Derbigny, and Armand Beauvais.

### Is That a Fact?

- Built in 1745, on the site of the previous convent, the Old Ursuline Convent is one of the oldest existing structures in the Mississippi Valley.
- The Old Ursuline Convent served as a nunnery and as the archbishop's residence before it became the state capitol in 1827. It is now home to the archives of the archdiocese.
- The present Ursuline Convent is located on State Street and has been there since 1912.
- The Orleans Theatre was converted into a home for black Catholic nuns in 1881.



# Return to the Crescent City

After returning to New Orleans, the legislature endured the cramped quarters of the ***Ursuline Convent***. A year later, government offices relocated to the spacious ***Charity Hospital***. Meanwhile, the growing population of New Orleans continued to threaten rural interests. Despite the failed move to Donaldsonville, the desire to relocate the capital remained.

The constitution created during the 1845 convention reflected a shift in political power toward rural interests. The new constitution required the capital relocate no less than 60 miles from New Orleans. Because Louisiana's roads were abysmal, the Mississippi remained the state's crucial mode of transportation; this left Baton Rouge as the only suitable candidate. In 1847, the legislature approved the architect (James Dakin) and appropriated money for the project. With the inauguration of Joseph Walker in 1850, the capital officially relocated to Baton Rouge.

## Is That a Fact?

- The Charity Hospital was built in 1815 to provide health care for the poor.
- In the 1840's, New Orleans was the fourth largest city in U.S. It would become the third by the early 1850's.
- The state government remained in the Charity Hospital for 17 years—the longest period in one place at that time.

## The Old Ursuline Convent 1831



The Governor serving here was Andre B. Roman.

## Charity Hospital 1831-1849



Governors serving here were Andre B. Roman, Edward D. White, Alexandre Mouton, and Isaac Johnson.

*“Art. 112. The General Assembly . . . shall, within the first month after the commencement of the session, designate and fix the seat of government at some place not less than sixty miles from the city of New Orleans, by the nearest travelling route, and if on the Mississippi river, by meanders of the same; and when so fixed, it shall not be removed without the consent of four-fifths of the members of both Houses of the General Assembly. The sessions shall be held in New Orleans until the end of the year 1848.”*

-Article 112 of the 1845 Louisiana Constitution



1866-1874

# Reconstruction: Louisiana Attempts to Rebuild

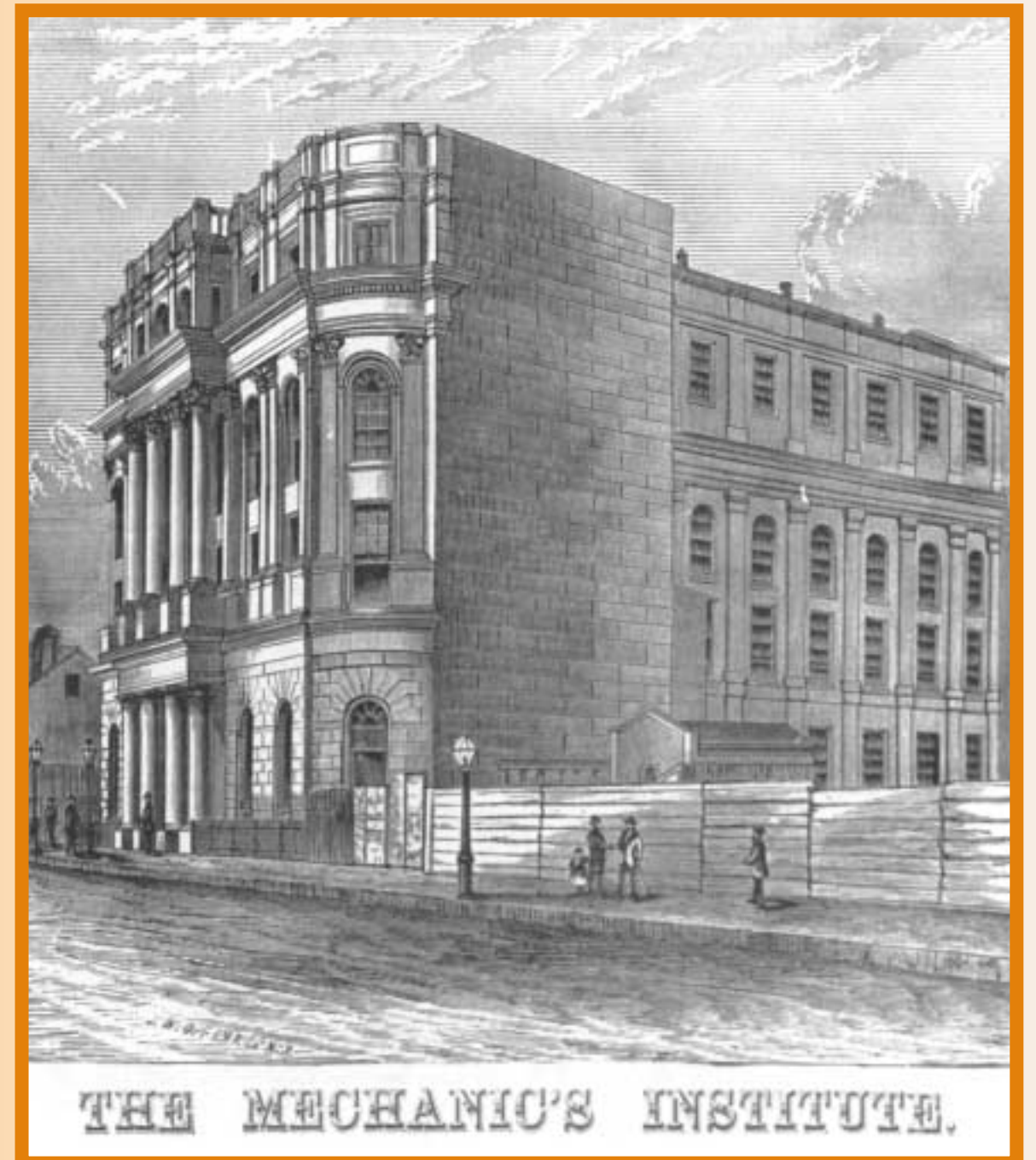
*“A Legislature representing the entire State of Louisiana is now convened for the first time since the breaking out of the war. We have had sectional, antagonistic, hole-and-corner Legislatures, year after year, which hesitated not to assume all the prerogatives of such bodies . . . but none in which the entire State was represented . . . The Legislature (is) now in session at the Mechanics Institute.”*

Editorial, New Orleans Times, 11/28/1865

The post-war Louisiana government faced numerous challenges, among them finding an appropriate building in which to govern. The 1864 Constitution had empowered the government to build a new state house, but no plans were ever proposed. Instead, the government leased the **Mechanics Institute**. The Institute proved unsatisfactory, even after years of extensive repair. At one point, the government leased nearby buildings just so politicians could work.

Had the legislature chosen a better building, the capital might have remained in New Orleans. Motivated by the Institute's worsening condition, several politicians proposed moving the capitol out of New Orleans. This proposal was temporarily put

## Mechanic's Institute

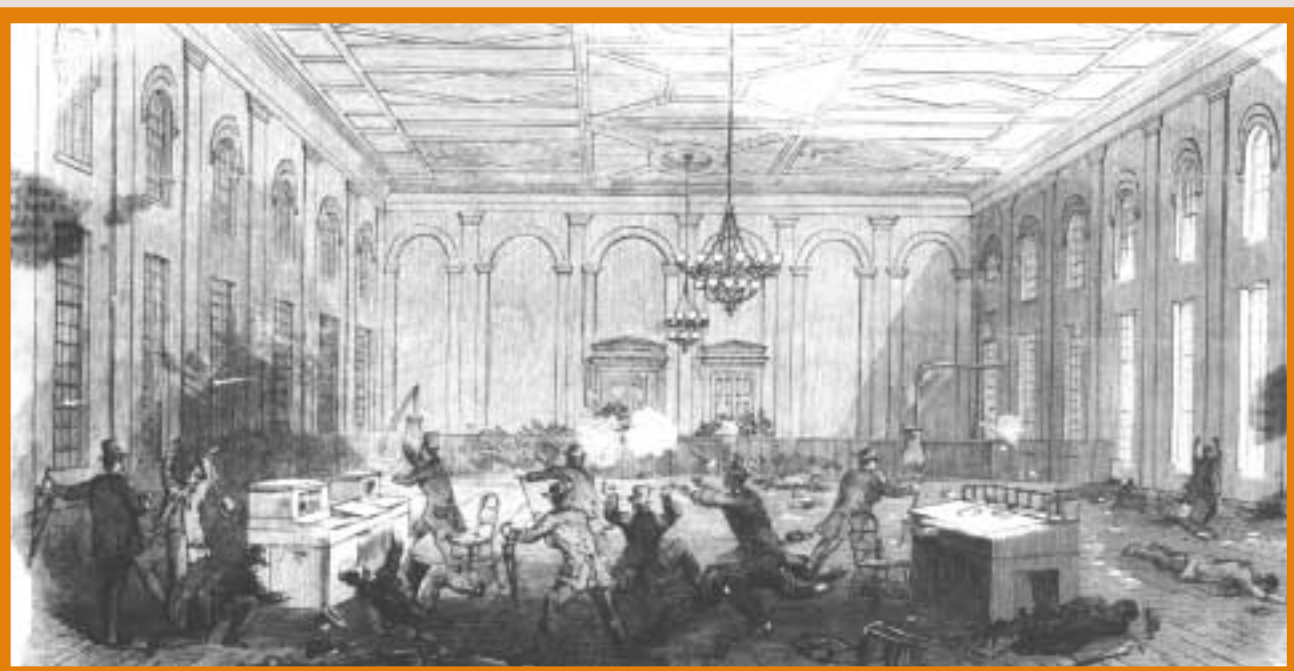


Governors serving here were James M. Wells, Benjamin F. Flanders, Joshua Baker, Henry C. Warmoth, P.B.S. Pinchback, and William P. Kellogg.

aside when the legislature discovered it could purchase the old **St Louis Hotel** for a reasonable price. The capital relocated there in 1874 to remain in New Orleans awhile longer.

### Is That a Fact?

- The riot of 1866, which broke out at the Mechanics Institute, paved the way for Radical Reconstruction the following year.
- The state rented the Institute for \$8,000 per year, but still paid \$7,050 in 1865 and \$15,000 1867 for repairs.
- A year after the state government vacated the Mechanics Institute, the University of Louisiana (now Tulane University) purchased the building and renamed it Tulane Hall.
- P.B.S. Pinchback, who served here, has been Louisiana's only black governor.



Riot of 1866



1875-1881

# Political Power Shifts: the Capital's Location is Reconsidered

*“By act of 1875, the purchase of the State House was authorized and \$250,000 were appropriated.”*

-H.D. Ogden, Attorney to Louisiana State Auditor,  
regarding bond sales, 2/1/1878

The **St. Louis Hotel** was certainly the most luxurious state house to date. However, the end of Reconstruction in 1877 as well as shifts in political power set the stage for yet another move. Working to reverse the effects of



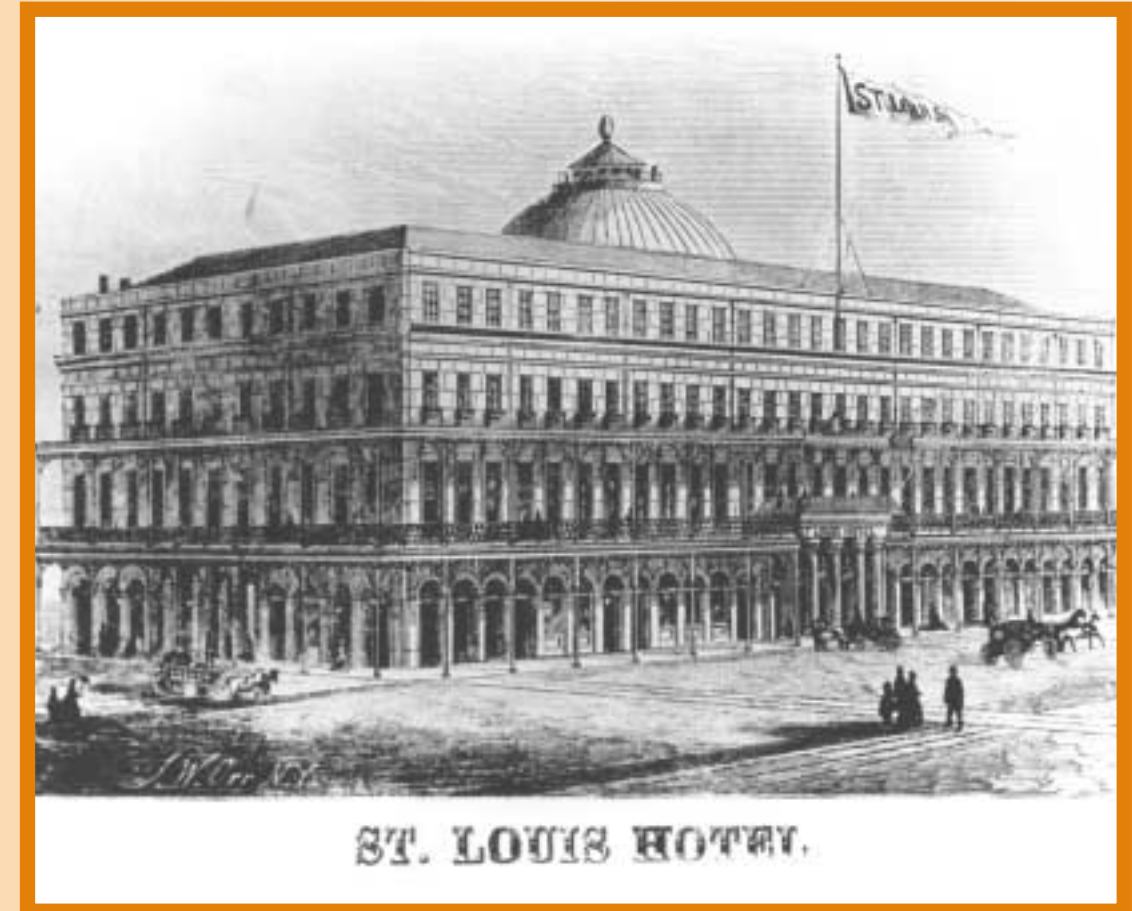
Legislators working in  
St. Louis Hotel

Reconstruction, a post-Reconstruction Constitutional Convention approved a new state constitution in 1879. The new constitution required the capital leave New Orleans and that any later relocations be

approved by three-fourths of the legislature.

Once more, the government looked to Baton Rouge. Finding the burned shell of the former state capitol structurally sound, the legislature decided to renovate. They hired William Freret, a New Orleans architect, and in 1882, eighteen months after renovation began, the government moved permanently back to **Baton Rouge**.

## St. Louis Hotel



William P. Kellogg, Francis R. Tillou Nicholls, Louis A. Wiltz, and Samuel D. McEnery served as Governors in the St. Louis Hotel

*“We the undersigned citizens of Baton Rouge, believing . . . that our little city has fairly triumphed in the last election, and is rightfully the chosen capitol of this state, . . . We know that Baton Rouge was supported by a large majority of the parishes and we not only cannot afford, but will not permit our defeat by an unlawful construction by the commissioners of election in the returning offices. All we ask is a fair count and honest returns and this we intend to have.”*

-Citizens of Baton Rouge,  
petition to return Capitol to Baton Rouge, 1872

### Is That a Fact?

- After it burned in 1841, the St. Louis Hotel was carefully rebuilt from the plans of its original architects—J.N.B. and Isadore DePouilly.
- The hotel contained murals by Dominique Canova, son of the well-known Italian sculptor Antonio Canova.
- Louisiana purchased the St. Louis Hotel for a modest \$250,000.
- The hotel was finally torn down after it was damaged by a hurricane in 1915.
- Today the Royal Orleans Hotel occupies the former site of the St. Louis Hotel. It's architecture is similar to the former state house.